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The local planning boards miss an opportunity

Chester Smolski

Planning boards in the communities of the state have the responsibility to study, advise and recommend strategies and policies for the growth and development of their respective cities and towns. These appointed members frequently have no background on such matters and must often make decisions on which they have little understanding. This is particularly true in areas of housing where PUD, PURD, Condo, Co-op, zero lot line zoning, and a host of other acronyms and concepts sometimes defy comprehension.

As a service to such planning board members and their respective communities, three interested parties offered a one-day trip, by motor coach, to nearby New Jersey and New York, to view first-hand some model housing developments. The cost — including lunch — was a paltry \$20. The Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program, Rhode Island Builders Association, and Urban Studies Program at Rhode Island College combined to make this opportunity available to all 39 planning boards.

Only two planning boards responded to the written invitation. After telephone calls to those who did not respond, two

more planning boards and a planning intern from one community indicated their desire to participate. Because of the poor overall interest from the planning boards, it became necessary to contact other groups, including planners, housers, local and state agencies, that might benefit from the experience. The 30 persons who eventually made the trip consisted of members of the sponsoring agencies, planning board representatives from the five communities, and faculty and students from three local colleges.

Exactly what did the participants see in this 15 hour, Saturday trip and, more importantly, what did they learn?

Radburn, New Jersey was celebrating, on the day of our visit, its 50th anniversary. A model for development throughout the world, perhaps more used in Europe than in this country, Radburn is as delightful to view today as it was when this writer first saw it 10 years ago. A warm touch was added when a kind resident invited all of us into her home, even with wet and dirty shoes, to show us an original Radburn house, the manner in which it was constructed and sited on a 60 x 105 feet lot, and explained the very real sense of community developed with Radburn planning, i.e., clustered housing with spacious parks in the center of the block and safety for her children because of the separation of cars from people. Not perfect,

she mentioned, but many more pluses than minuses, and she continues to be enthusiastic and happy about this community of 3,000 residents in which she has lived for 12 years.

The Meadowlands, situated in the swamps and marshlands of eastern New Jersey just across the Hudson from Manhattan, is well known as the site of the Sports Complex. Home of the Giants and Cosmos, it stands as a prominent landmark on these "smoggy-boggy" flatlands.

This 20,000 acre site, long shunned by developers because of difficult building conditions — partly resulting from its former use as a garbage dump — is now being rapidly developed. A general hospital, 10-story office block, Hilton hotel, racquet club, 640 townhouse units are already in place, and a 1,463 apartment high-rise condominium complex is under construction. This development started just five years ago when Panasonic located its headquarters in the Meadowlands.

The proposed regional shopping center for the area is stalled because of competition between two sites of different developers and a major policy question here in this part of New Jersey — does such development accelerate the economic and social decline of nearby, old cities, such as Newark, Jersey City and Hackensack? Should it be allowed to take place?

The planned new town-in-town on

Roosevelt Island must be seen to be understood. Located on an island in the East River just four minutes away from midtown Manhattan by aerial tramway, this high density living complex provides solitude and pedestrian safety in the heart of America's largest city. Like it or not, Roosevelt Island deserves study as an urban response to residential need.

These three stops were designed to acquaint planning board members with alternative methods of residential land use. It is unfortunate that more did not take advantage of this opportunity. I choose not to believe that "some of these planning board members don't want to learn anything about any place west of Scituate" as one participant claimed, but if we intend to make wise use of our land then we must examine the successes and failures of communities that lie at our doorstep.

Better and more intelligent choices on residential land use come from knowledgeable and dedicated planning board members. It is to be hoped that if subsequent opportunities arise to increase this knowledge, more of these appointed citizens will take advantage of them. All Rhode Island communities stand to benefit from better-informed planning boards.

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